

# Colloquies and Vulgars

Matthew Adams

Latin was once a language which students learned not just to read and write but also to speak. But what we need to write or to understand when reading is not the same as what we need to say. Matthew Adams has been delving into how Latin was taught in the time of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I - and finding that old school text-books teach you some bizarre things about past life, as well as some fascinating Latin phrases.

Imagine opening your copy of *The Cambridge Latin Course* and reading the following sentence:

*His nose is like a shoeing-horn*

followed by the Latin translation:

*simus est homini nasus.*

Then on page two:

*I am almost beshytten.  
sum in articulo purgandi viscera.*

That's the way to learn Latin! But no one would write books like that - or would they?

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'Colloquies and Vulgars' were some of the most widely-recognised methods in schools for the teaching of Latin speaking (yes, speaking, for this was an age when Latin was still a spoken language). It was a common practice for school statutes to demand pupils speak Latin at all times, both in and out of school: those who refused, or couldn't, were punished, usually severely. Latin was still the international language, and Latin-speaking was a *sine qua non*.

Up to this time the acting of plays had fulfilled some of the requirements for spoken Latin, and it was believed that colloquial Latin was best learnt through the comedies, of Plautus and Terence in particular, though with the rude stuff missed out. However, teachers often faced an uphill struggle in ensuring that their charges held true to the school statutes and the Latin tongue. To this end, two new methods for teaching Latin were introduced around the beginning of the sixteenth century, to add to the schoolmaster's armoury. For the first time, then, the *Colloquia* and *Vulgaria*, soon to become well-known and routine methods of teaching, enter the classroom.

Some phrases were designed to promote the very subject in question:

*It is a gret helpe for schollars to  
speke latyn.  
non nihil conducit discipulis loqui  
latine*

while others were essential, everyday phrases:

*Wipe thy nose.  
munge nasum.*

*I am sore troubled with the  
tooth ache.  
dentium dolore graviter infestor.*

And yet other phrases were just downright bizarre:

*They that have theyr eyes depe  
in theyr heede see welle.  
qui conditos habent oculos acute  
vident.*

Even earlier than the *Colloquia*, the *Vulgaria* were introduced towards the end of the fifteenth century. John Anwykyll, headmaster (*Informator*) of Magdalen College School, Oxford, 1481-7, published his Latin grammar in 1483. Attached to this (and, later, sold separately), was his *Certain everyday expressions from Terence translated into English* (*Vulgaria quaedam a Terentio in Anglicam linguam traducta*). *Vulgaria*, then, were an attempt to supply schoolboys with the vocabulary of everyday life in phrases and lists of words, written in hexameters as an *aide-memoire*. They were common phrases in the vulgar, or English, tongue.

John Stanbridge succeeded Anwykyll at Magdalen College School in 1494. Like his predecessor, he published his *Vulgaria* (in 1508), a sort of verse dictionary of Latin words one might use for composition. His book was immensely popular.

*I fare well thanked be god.  
bene me habeo altithrono sit  
gratia.*

*The fatte stycketh to the rofe of*

*my mouthie.  
pinguedo carnum heret palato  
meo.*

*The latyn is full of fautes.  
materia latina est mendosa.*

*A gyven hors may not be loked  
in the tethe.  
donati equi non respicere licet.*

The next book of *Vulgaria* to appear on the scene was that of William Horman, headmaster of Eton 1485-94, and Winchester 1494-1502. His book of 1519 was much more elaborate than those of his predecessors. Horman's *Vulgaria* comprises some 3000 English sentences with a Latin translation beneath. These are grouped under titles such as *De Pietate*, *De Impietate*, *De Animi Bonis et Malis*, indeed, on almost every subject. Horman's *Vulgaria* was a bridge between the staid grammar books and the original Latin authors, though he is less colloquial than Stanbridge. Some examples thus:

*I go to Oxenforde for my  
lernynge.  
Oxoniam peto ob animi cultum.*

*Lend me thy Terence for this  
seuynnyght.  
mutua mihi Terentium ad vel in  
septem dies non pro.*

*I can nat construe my fatten.  
nescio praescriptum ordinare vel  
explicare.*

*He applied hym self with great  
diligence to greke.  
Graeca studia ingenti cura secutus  
est.*

*A worme is crept into myne  
eare.  
vermis irrepsit in scaphum.*

*Earewaxe doth stop the  
entrynge from small bestis.  
sordes aurium bestiolis adytum  
praeccludunt.*

*He is somewhat bygge belyd.  
est ventre paulo proiectiore.*

*Thou hast a grymme and grys-  
ley loke.  
tu es vultu tetro et horrido.*

*He looked as though he wolde  
shyte.  
erat vultu nitenti similis.*

*My myddell finger is longest.  
infamis digitus est longissimus.*

*I am sore in my foundement.  
afficior in sede.*

*Latin speech is almost ruined by  
proud fools presuming to teach  
before they have learnt.  
latina eloquentia pessum init  
culpa arrogantium qui antea profi-  
tentur quam didicerint.*

The later *Colloquia* were books written in the form of dialogues, often dealing with the ordinary events of everyday life, written in English, with a Latin version beneath. In spite of the fact that the *Colloquium* was not native to England, it soon became a necessary ingredient of the English school curriculum. Many of the *Colloquia* are lively and entertaining snippets of information, dealing with sixteenth-century views and daily life. There are many to choose from. For example, *The Schoolmaster's Admonitions*, which teaches boys manners and behaviour; *The Abbot and the Learned Woman*, where the woman is praised for reading Latin and Greek, rather than French; *The Whipping Master*, which includes the Tudor schoolboy's essential phrase:

*The mayster hath bete me.  
preceptor a me sumpsit penas.*

Other colloquies ('conversations') are about writing and quill-making; the bad effect of fear on the memory; the schoolboy at school, at home, in town, getting up in the morning, getting dressed; drunkenness; education. The list, it seems, was almost endless. These *colloquia* contain much learning, but also humour, and they are educationally engaging and valuable.

Erasmus' *Colloquia* was an excellent beginner's book, and remained in use for centuries, even appearing in a school textbook of 1906, nearly 400 years after first publication! Indeed, it became *the* school text. First published in November 1518, and expanded with each subsequent edition, its original purpose was to provide models of correct Latin for schoolboys, and, of equal importance, to teach them the correct moral path: 'This little book makes better Latinists and better characters of school boys', says Erasmus himself in the dedication of the 1524 edition. Here's one in the eye for today's politicians who insist on the introduction of citizenship lessons to provide a moral compass in schools.

Erasmus (whom we last met in *Omnibus* 52) born in the latter half of the fifteenth century, was not one to be backward in coming forward. In his books as in his life, he was vehemently outspoken against what he regarded as outmoded and superstitious practices within the church. At a time when the Bible had yet to be translated into English, he regarded study of the classical languages as an important

way to worship Christ: his many opponents regarded him as a dangerous and outspoken heretic. Hence, despite its eventual success, in 1522 the Prior of the Carmelites at Louvain wanted to burn the *Colloquies* for their supposed Lutheran heresies (shades of *Satanic Verses* here). In 1526 the University of Paris denounced 69 passages from Erasmus' *Colloquies* as 'erroneous, scandalous or impious' and declared the book was to be forbidden to all, especially to the young: it was to be banished from Christendom – *a finibus eliminaretur Christianorum* – and in 1528 the same university banned his *Colloquies* entirely. Students needed no second invitation and, once this book entered the forbidden list, schools in countries influenced by the Reformation rushed to purchase it; and the book was even demanded by statute in some establishments. Cuckfield 1529, East Retford 1552, Bangor 1568, Harrow 1590 all included Erasmus in their required reading lists. It begs the question what would happen today were the government to ban copies of *The Cambridge Latin Course*, or even have them burnt in the streets. Now there's a thought...

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